

Bridge Over Troubled Waters

British Author's Latest Rocks the Boat, and Perhaps Her Audience

by Amanda Schurr

Ten years, four books, and one Friday evening dinner after making a name for herself as a bold, bawdy lesbian novelist, Sarah Waters is on the phone, all propriety and vedy vedy British. It's mid-morning in Portland, where the London-based author will visit May 4 – one of only six U.S. dates during a promotional tour for her latest book, *The Little Stranger* (Riverhead Books, \$26.95 hardcover).

Gracious and with a delicate accent, Waters is deceptively soft-spoken. She knows where the conversation is going as she discusses the novel, an old-fashioned ghost tale set in post-WWII rural England. *The Little Stranger* marks a significant and perhaps polarizing departure for the scribe behind seminal lesbian text *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and its successors, *Affinity* (1999), *Fingersmith* (2002) and *The Night Watch* (2006).

The hallmarks of her fiction are there: painterly, fluid prose; an eyewitness' attention to period detail; intimate plays on social structures; a uniquely sensual, oft times startlingly erotic approach to gender and relationships.

She even revisits the 1940s era of *Watch*, and the first-person narration of its prior three novels. But there's something different about the character telling this story.

He's male.

"I was conscious at the start, thinking, 'Oh God, am I going to be able to carry this off? Can I make a male voice really true?'" Waters, who identifies as lesbian, admits. "I've never really had to inhabit a man in the way I had to with this novel." Still, her fears faded once she began the process, likening the challenge to any other "imaginative leap" involved in creating a character.

The plot concerns Dr. Faraday, a country doctor summoned to the dilapidated Ayres family manor, and his growing fascination with its inhabitants – earthly and otherwise. Among those roaming Hundreds Hall, a shell-shocked Royal Air Force vet, an ailing young maid, a spooked matriarch, and Caroline, the level-headed heroine – what Waters describes as *Stranger's* main character, despite its male narrator.

The book is a Dickensian look at class – her most deliberate yet, an evolution of motifs broached in Waters' Victorian melodramas and continued in *Watch's* mid-twentieth-century portrait. It's also a moody, creeping page turner, with echoes of Edgar Allan Poe. For the author, the supernatural realm was a

natural progression, and a liberating new way of exploring the themes that earned her both critical and commercial success.

"We're still very much at the point where we have to make a fuss about it. We need our rights... but once you've got them, yeah, it'd be great if sexuality was not an issue. It'd be fab."

SARAH WATERS

"I think haunted house stories reveal a lot about the culture that's produced them. They're very often about people who are trapped," Waters says, citing Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" as an example of how the gothic genre has been used to illuminate the female experience throughout history. The Wales native turned to fiction while researching her dissertation in gay and lesbian literature.

"We really only have fragments about women's lives, but then, as a novelist, I can flesh out the gaps a bit, have fun with them. That for me is at the root of writing," continues Waters, whose debut, *Tipping the Velvet*, was a bodice-ripping, girl-on-girl yarn. A *New York Times* Notable Book, it garnered her a devout lesbian fanbase; subsequent works landed her the *Sunday Times* Young Writer Award and on the shortlist for the prestigious Orange Prize and Man Booker Prize.

Waters concedes her anxiety that this latest tome, in the absence of any major gay and lesbian characters, may alienate readers. "I do understand that disappointment, because we don't see ourselves represented," she says. "We want to hang onto our authors and our filmmakers, our artists.... I know that, but I want to let my books develop by themselves. And with this novel, there wasn't anything calculated about me not having a lesbian element."

The author acknowledges that she's done



as "much as anybody to label" her writing lesbian, assuring audiences she will return to the subject. As for now, she's warming to the idea of a contemporary novel. "I used to say, 'I couldn't imagine it,'" Waters says. "I'm endlessly fascinated by the past, the fact that you don't have to go that far back, [only] 60 years to the '40s and things were quite radically different for men, and women... Just trying to capture that is a real thrill."

Still, "I've found myself becoming interested in trying out new things," she adds. "History is ongoing. We're living in a state of flux, and in another 60 years, we'll be..." Waters trails off. Talk turns to marriage-equality stateside, and civil partnerships across what she calls the "very very gay-friendly" pond, and the possibility that one day, labels won't matter, for couples – and for novelists.

"I guess that's what we're all working for, really, isn't it?" she observes. "We're still very much at the point where we have to make a fuss about it. We need our rights... but once you've got them, yeah, it'd be great if sexuality was not an issue. It'd be fab."

Waters will be at Powell's Books, 1005 W. Burnside, at 7:30 p.m. Monday, May 4. For a complete transcript of the interview, visit blog-out.justout.com.

KNIT & CROCHET SHOW

Doubletree Hotel
Portland

May 15-17

Fri & Sat 10-6

Sun 10-3

Admiss: \$10, \$5 ea add'l day
(Park: \$12 - give Show name)

Shopping, Classes, Fun!
See vendors & classes online

www.KnitandCrochetShow.com

Bring this ad
for \$2 off

IT'S MY PLEASURE



GIFTS OF ROMANCE FOR WOMEN
AND ALL WHO LOVE THEM

3106 NE 64th Avenue, Portland

503-280-8080 On the corner of Sandy Blvd & 64th

Want to try Acupuncture?

Now's the time!

Five Element Acupuncture, Facial
Rejuvenation, Pain Management,
Colds & Flu, Stress



Dragon's Dream
ACUPUNCTURE

13765 NW Cornell Rd STE 150 Portland, OR 97229

503 568 4508 BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

Jonathan J. Dailey, L.Ac.

www.dragonsdreamacupuncture.com

Anita Pace and Harriet Carpenter



Murrayhill
VETERINARY HOSPITAL

"We have dogs and cats of various ages and special needs. Having a veterinary facility with several exceptional vets is important to us. Getting the treatment for one of our 'kids' is even more convenient. Our appointments are never rushed and always thorough. We have the highest regard for all the staff at Murrayhill Veterinary Hospital and appreciate all they do for our pets and for us."

FREE

Complete Physical &
Dental Exam
On Your First Visit!
Call now to schedule.

14831 SW Teal Blvd. BEAVERTON 503.579.3300
www.murrayhillvethospital.com